English Language Development Standards and Benchmarks: Policy Issues and a Call for More Focused Research

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Abstract

Although many states and school districts require reading benchmarks and performance standards, these reading benchmarks may not be consistent or based on sound educational research concerning what is best for English Language Learners (ELLs). The purpose of this paper is to provide a discussion for the need of research to establish realistic grade-level student performance standards in English reading for ELL students with different levels of English-language proficiency. An overview of the California English Language Development Standards and the issues involved is intended to help understand the enormous implications they have on ELLs.

Introduction

In 1997, California adopted the English Language Arts (ELA) Content Standards and Reading/Language Arts Framework. This document is important because it defines what all California students, including English language learners (ELLs), are expected to know and be able to do. The Reading/Language Arts Framework assumes that all students will attain proficiency on the ELA standards, but it also acknowledges that not all learners will acquire skills and knowledge at the same rate. Therefore, the California English Language Development (ELD) Standards were developed and adopted in 1999. The ELD standards are "designed to supplement the ELA standards to ensure that ELLs develop proficiency in both the English language and the concepts and skills contained in the ELA standards" (California Department of Education, 1999a). These standards were developed by a 15-member committee comprised of practitioners and experts in ELD and assessment.

Recently, there has been a rapidly growing amount of discourse on educational standards. After 15 years of searching, Zenger and Zenger (2002) concluded that no solid basis existed in the research for "how we currently develop, place and align educational standards in school curricula" (p. 212). Standards and assessments have dominated K–12 curriculum design at the national, state, and local levels on an arbitrary and subjective basis. The recent national trend toward a standards-based curriculum has required districts to specify annual grade-level academic goal expectations. For example, by Grade 2, the California ELD standards state that students should be able to "read and use simple sentences to orally respond to stories by answering factual comprehension questions" (California Department of Education, 1999a, p. 58). Unfortunately, these expectations were not research based; that is, grade-level expectation did not reflect research documenting the rate at which the average student is able to acquire specified content standards. The ELD standards are essentially based on the ELA standards developed for native English speakers. More importantly, these grade-level content expectations failed to consider the impact of students who are in the process of developing English-language skills upon the rate at which the content standards may be acquired. In short, the ELL population, which is traditionally underserved and underperforming, is judged on criteria that is not based on applicable empirical data. This may unfairly place ELLs at even greater risk for failure and retention.

This paper analyzes and discusses policy issues affecting ELLs (i.e., ELD standards and benchmarks). First, a review of content standards, benchmarks, and reclassification will be presented, followed by an overview of the California ELA and ELD standards. Next, factors affecting the rate of English-language development will be discussed. These factors include the role of the first language (L1), economics, sociocultural factors, and schools as they relate to English-language development. Most importantly, this paper focuses on the need for more research to establish realistic grade-level student performance standards in English reading for ELL students who have different levels of English-language proficiency. The results of this research would give educators a clear idea of how long it takes ELLs to reach each benchmark and would, therefore, provide reasonable expectations based on empirical data.

Problem Statement

Congress approved the Reading Excellence Act (1998) to develop a national comprehensive research-based effort to improve reading achievement. The Reading Excellence Act requirements were based on the results of the National Reading Panel's (NRP's) findings of reading research. These findings were to be used to guide the development and implementation of public policy to improve literacy instruction for all students. This report has significantly influenced the direction of standards in reading at state and national levels, which has also affected the reading instruction offered in schools, districts,

and teacher preparation programs. The federal government's move to have research-based reading policies is problematic for many reasons, but especially for the ELL population because the NRP's findings are based exclusively on studies of monolingual English speakers learning to read and did not consider research in reading for ELLs (Ramírez, 2001). There is a strong need to clarify how the NRP's requirements can best be applied to ELLs. (For discussion of the possible limitations of the NRP findings for L1 acquirers, see Allington, 2002; Garan, 2002.)

The requirements and findings of the NRP report are particularly problematic for the most rapidly growing segment of our school population: ELLs. Although English-language development and academic development are interrelated, they are two distinct sets of competencies. For example, there is a certain amount of English-language proficiency required for math. In *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics* (2004) by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, students are required to possess a minimal amount of English proficiency to meet certain requirements. The performance tasks include either writing, reading comprehension, or oral language. For example, one of the standards for grades PreK–2 requires students to analyze change in various contexts. The expectation is to describe qualitative change, such as a student's growing taller, and describe quantitative change, such as a student's growing 2 inches in 1 year.

Standards, Benchmarks, and Reclassification

First of all, there is little data on how long it takes to reach the benchmarks in the ELD standards. For the purpose of this paper, I define benchmarks as the expected knowledge and skills that students should acquire by a particular time. Previous studies have focused on when children reach grade level or the 50th percentile for English proficiency (Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1981; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000).

Since reading development is one of the most fundamental skills that ELLs must acquire if they are to be successful in school, establishing clear, developmentally appropriate, and rigorous benchmarks for growth in reading is critical. It is important to examine how long it takes children to reach intermediate stages, or benchmarks. Research should be done to determine an average rate of achieving benchmarks, including the stage of reclassification as fluent English proficient (FEP), with expected ranges of variation depending on additional factors.

The issue of how long it takes to acquire English has been debated for a long time among educators. In California, Proposition 227 allows ELD support and services for only 1 year for ELLs before they are placed into mainstream classes. However, several large-scale studies have found that an average of 5 years is required for ELLs to attain grade norms for academic levels of English proficiency (Collier, 1987, 1992; Cummins, 1981; Ramírez, 1992). Most recently, Hakuta et al.'s (2000) study of two California districts that are considered the

most successful in teaching English to ELL students found that it takes 3 to 5 years to develop oral proficiency at the 50th percentile and 4 to 7 years to develop grade-level academic English proficiency. Although this is useful information, it refers only to how long it takes ELLs to reach high levels of English-language proficiency. It does not give educators an idea of how long it takes to reach intermediate stages along the way.

Many educators acknowledge the need to identify content standards and expected performance at various grade levels, that is, what students need to learn, how well, and by when (Wiley & Hartung-Cole, 1997). Although content standards, performance standards, and benchmarks are related, each term needs to be differentiated. A content standard is defined as what it is that students should know and be able to do. For example, an English language arts content standard in Grade 1 would be to "identify and correctly use contractions (e.g., isn't, aren't)" (California Department of Education, 1999b). Performance standards should also state how well the students achieve the standard and at what level of performance (Laturnau, 2001). Benchmarks should be identified at all levels of development at certain points in time such as months, years, and/or grade levels. They identify progress toward realizing performance standards. However, many benchmarks are developed with a few levels; for example, the California ELD standards identify reading benchmarks for Grades K–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12. Districts are required to specify grade-level reading benchmarks for all students, and especially for ELLs.

The following is a specific example of a developmental sequence for narrative language in the California ELD standards for writing. It includes content standards, performance standards, and benchmarks:

Beginning:

Grades K–2

1. Write short narrative stories that include the elements of setting and character.
2. Produce independent writing that is understood when read, but may include inconsistent use of standard grammatical forms.

Grades 3–5

1. Narrate a sequence of events with some detail.
2. Produce independent writing that is understood when read, but may include inconsistent use of standard grammatical forms.

Grades 6–8

1. Narrate a sequence of events and communicate their significance to the audience.
2. Write brief expository compositions (e.g., description, compare and contrast, cause and effect, and problem/solution) that include a thesis and some points of support. (California Department of Education, 1999a, p. 68)

The federal and state requirements for programs for ELLs require that ELD instruction must be differentiated according to each student's level of English proficiency. In addition, all ELLs must receive a defined ELD program until redesignated and be given an ongoing assessment of their progress in English proficiency.

Although specific benchmarks in the ELD standards are defined, there are no assessments or "markers" indicating what specific standards have been reached or need to be emphasized for instruction. The California ELD Test only indicates English proficiency levels in the areas of writing, reading, listening, and speaking.

Second, the goals of English-language development and the benchmarks and performance standards are crucial as to why students are classified as ELLs to start with. ELLs' academic achievement is the basis for their reclassification as FEP. School districts have not reached a consensus on a system of reclassification for ELLs. Reclassification is based on multiple measures. Linquanti (2001) found that reclassification criteria for seven school districts in California included varying components such as: (a) academic achievement standards (SAT 9 and/or subject grades); (b) basic language proficiency standards (previously the Language Assessment Scales, IDEA Proficiency Test, and Student Oral Language Observation Matrix; the California ELD Test; (c) additional cognitive and academic-language dimensions (such as grades or teacher observations); and (d) parental consent.

In addition to the inconsistencies and arbitrary choice of criteria, the component of reclassification based on standardized, norm-referenced tests needs to be reexamined (Linquanti, 2001; Hakuta et al., 2000). The academic English criterion is complicated and usually measured with a standardized English reading achievement test, such as the SAT 9. These tests are norm referenced to a national sample of largely native English speakers, and usually a criterion around the 36th percentile rank is used for redesignation as FEP. It does not make sense to use a criterion based on a norm-referenced test developed for a different population. In conclusion, the methods used to calculate reclassification rates distorts the reality of achievement for ELLs.

Factors Affecting Rate of English-Language Development

The rate for ELLs acquiring English is highly variable. Some children acquire the English language much faster than others. It is important to know why, in order to set reasonable expectations for different subgroups and in order to improve instruction. Research should determine the impact of several factors on the rate of achieving benchmarks. These include factors that are common to L1 and second language (L2) acquirers; others are particular to L2 acquirers.[1]

Role of the First Language

One factor particular to L2 acquirers is the role of L1. A number of studies show clear correlations between reading in L1 and L2, a result that strongly suggests that students who read better in their L1 also tend to read better in their L2. Nearly all studies that have compared L1 and L2 reading have found positive correlations, but there is some variation in the size of the correlations. Krashen (2003) has observed that the impact of L1 reading ability on L2 reading ability is stronger when children are tested at a younger age; the correlation between age and the relationship between L1 and L2 literacy is negative ($r = -.32$). In other words, the ability to read in L1 has a stronger influence on L2 reading for a 7-year-old than it does for a 10-year-old. This result suggests that reading ability in L1 has its strongest effect in the early stages of L2 literacy development.

In the early stages, the influence of the L1 appears to be stronger than the influence of spoken L2 competence (Escamilla, 1987; Tregar & Wong, 1984). This reflects an important distinction that Cummins (1981) makes between conversational and academic language and his hypothesis of a strong relationship between academic language in L1 and L2.

August, Calderon, and Carlo (2000) examined the relationship between reading ability in L1 at the end of second grade and reading ability in L2 (English) at the end of third grade. They found an "effect of transfer from Spanish to English exists for phonemic segmentation skills, letter identification skills, and word naming skills" (p. 14). They concluded that their findings support the practice of providing literacy instruction in the native language (Spanish) to Spanish-speaking ELLs as a means of helping them acquire literacy skills in English.

Cobo-Lewis, Eilers, Pearson, and Umbel (2002) reported that for second- and fifth-grade ELL students who spoke Spanish as their L1, tests involving reading and writing (Word Attack, Letter-Word, Passage Comprehension, Proofing, and Diction) were highly intercorrelated, regardless of the language of the test. Tests involving oral language (verbal analogies and oral vocabulary), however, only intercorrelated with other oral tests given in the same language. These results are consistent with the hypothesis that literacy transfers across languages.

In addition to the literacy transfer research, when considering age, current state standards do not specify guidelines for the rates of improvement or overall time frames during which students are expected to "catch up." While ELLs are trying to "catch up," their native English-speaking peers are continuing to increase their own literacy skills. Thus, ELLs are trying to hit a moving target by aiming for the same reading level as their native English-speaking peers.

California English Language Arts Content Standards and English Language Development Standards

The ELD standards can be beneficial and important for several reasons. One of the purposes of the ELD standards was to create pathways or benchmarks to the California ELA standards. The ELD standards integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing and create a distinct pathway to reading in English rather than delaying the introduction to English reading. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that ELLs come to school with a very different set of language abilities and experiences in comparison to English monolinguals. Merino and Rumberger (1999) found that research has shown most 5-year-old native English-speaking students enter school with a speaking vocabulary of between 2,000 and 8,000 words. These students have also mastered the basic sentence structure of English by the age of 7 or 8, and they have mastered most of the basic sounds of English. ELLs have to become proficient in these areas just to catch up. Therefore, the standards developed for native speakers of English are not appropriate for the initial development of English for ELLs.

There are clear similarities between L1 and L2 acquisition, but there are also some differences. One difference is in the order of acquisition of grammatical structures (California Department of Education, 1999a). Research has shown that some grammatical structures (such as subject–verb agreement) are learned relatively earlier by native English speakers than by L2 acquirers (Krashen, 1981). In general, however, research has found that L2 learners acquire the rules of language in a predictable order (Dulay & Burt, 1974). In addition, the pace of acquisition among ELLs differs by age (California Department of Education, 1999a).

Because the ELD standards were created as pathways to the ELA standards, the basis of the development of the ELA standards and the development of early reading skills also need to be carefully examined. Research on the development of early reading skills notes many similarities as well as important differences between monolingual non-English speakers and monolingual English speakers. The unique structure of orthography for different languages greatly impacts the relationship between the orthography, phonology, morphology, and meaning in the processing of print (Durgunoglu & Oney, 2002).

Thonis (1991) identified the transfer of reading abilities from L1 to L2 in both general and specific terms. The general concept is that literacy will transfer from one language to another regardless of which two languages are involved. The specific concept is that transfer from one language to another is easier if the two languages have similar orthographic systems (e.g., Spanish–English transfer). In contrast to studies of monolingual English speakers, studies of monolingual Spanish speakers reveal that vowels should be taught before consonants in beginning reading programs (Escamilla, 2000). Similar to native

English speakers, native Spanish speakers were also found to use language patterns to develop their reading and writing skills. For example, Escamilla and Coady (2000) found that the language patterns used by monolingual Spanish speakers differ from those used by their monolingual English-speaking peers because of the unique orthographic and syntactic features of Spanish.

Although research demonstrates that there are many similarities in the development of early reading skills for native English speakers and ELLs, there are important differences in how ELLs develop English reading (e.g., what is learned first, how reading is taught, and how quickly it is learned).

Economic, Sociocultural, and School Factors

Economic and sociocultural factors are important to examine in order to understand the process of English-language development; these factors are relevant to all children. Social class is a strong predictor for academic success or failure among students. Students from poor families are more likely to be at risk for academic achievement. Sociocultural factors and whether the student is an immigrant or native born (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1994) are also important factors to consider affecting academic achievement.

August and Hakuta (1997) have also identified specific factors such as schoolwide climate, use of native language and culture in instruction, staff development, parental involvement, and school leadership, which contribute to ELLs' high academic performance. Professional preparation of teachers, who serve linguistically diverse students, has a direct impact on instruction and the students. Teachers who are identified with the characteristics of experience, professional knowledge, and coherent teaching philosophy are usually considered more "effective teachers" to best serve culturally diverse student populations" (García, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Strong administrative leadership of schools also impact the school community and learning, particularly for linguistically and culturally diverse students (García, 2002). Research on effective instruction indicates that students are much more likely to be successful when the curriculum and teaching approaches build on the diversity of the students and teachers (Freeman & Freeman, 2001; Pease-Álvarez, García, & Espinoza, 1991). Last of all, in research dealing with English-proficient children, many studies have shown that the print environment students experience in school and at home has a profound effect on their reading skills and test scores (Lance, Welborn, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993; McQuillan, 1998). Lance et al. found that Colorado schools with better school libraries (i.e., staff and books) had higher reading scores, even when factors such as poverty and availability of computers were controlled.

A study of these factors will clarify the conditions necessary to best foster growth in English for ELLs. Since the ELD benchmarks are grade clusters, there are no clearly defined benchmarks. In addition, although many states and school districts require reading benchmarks and performance standards,

these reading benchmarks may not be consistent or based on sound educational research. A study analyzing 42 state standards in reading and language arts (Wixson & Dutro, 1999) found the majority of state documents did not provide specific benchmarks or outcomes for Grades K–3. Furthermore, when the documents did provide benchmarks, many did not provide a logical developmental progression across grades. Furthermore, in an analysis of several studies on language arts standards, Valencia and Wixson (2000) found the work on standards and implementation of new assessments suggested that the translation from literacy research to standards and from standards to assessment was not clear.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although many states and school districts require reading benchmarks and performance standards, these reading benchmarks may not be consistent or based on sound educational research concerning what is best for ELLs. If educators knew the amount of time it takes ELLs to go from one benchmark to the next, they could establish realistic grade-level student performance standards and goals in reading achievement for students, schools, and districts. The problem is that there is no research base that defines developmentally appropriate rigorous student performance standards, let alone one that explicitly considers the impact of English-language proficiency in the development of these standards. Therefore, research on ELD standards and benchmarks could also improve on previous studies by including intermediate stages of literacy learning, so that educators can develop clearer benchmarks based on research.

The California ELD standards and the California ELD Test were developed to provide consistency in assessment and academic goals for all ELLs. However, educators and researchers must investigate whether or not the development of the ELD standards actually result in better reading and writing instruction for ELLs. The ELD standards affect students in three major areas: retention, access to courses of study, and redesignation. However, these standards and benchmarks were not based on sufficient research. Since the standards have a tremendous impact on ELLs, grade-level student performance standards based on research are needed. Currently, students are being retained if they have do not meet the grade-level standard in specific content areas. In addition, students are placed or tracked in specific courses based on their academic performance and/or competencies, particularly in language arts and math. Moreover, if students do not meet specific content standards, they do not have access to the college prep curriculum or advanced placement classes. Last of all, as mentioned earlier, performance standards and benchmarks have a great impact on redesignation.

The use of the ELD standards can have positive effects on instruction when they are both challenging and achievable, and when they are appropriate

for all major segments of the student population in the grade-level group for which they are intended (Wiley & Hartung-Cole, 1997). Although ELD standards are required and can be beneficial, it is very important to keep in mind their limitations. Students are often evaluated on performance standards that are distinct and separable (such as language proficiency tests). Teachers and educators need to be careful about labeling or judging students based on any single test (language or psychological), especially one that is not in the language of the students (Wink, 2000). In California, since the reclassification criteria is heavily based on the California ELD Test and the test is based on the California ELD standards, it is critical that there be a strong research basis for these standards. Although there are many benefits to the use of the ELD standards to achieve equitable instruction for ELLs, Wiley and Hartung-Cole (1997) state that caution is needed to maintain a balanced focus on instructional process and student performance. Caution should be used in the implementation of standards. There are many educators who are highly critical of the nature of the standards (Kohn, 2001) and the levels of details that are prescribed. Because standards have dominated the curriculum at many levels, however, there is a need to develop and maintain a strong research basis.

Recommendations for Future Research

This overview of the ELD standards and the issues involved is intended to help clarify the enormous implications they have on ELLs. The purpose of this paper is to provide a discussion for the need of research to establish realistic grade-level student performance standards in English reading for ELL students with different levels of English-language proficiency. These results would give educators a clear idea of the rate of acquisition and reasonable expectations for English-language development. Educators can then determine how quickly the average child moves through the benchmarks, which would enable us to establish realistic guidelines for children of different ages, those starting at different grades, and those with different backgrounds.

Some research questions that need to be investigated are:

1. How long does it take for ELLs to reach each benchmark?
2. How does the development of student grade-level performance standards differ as a function of different levels of English-language proficiency? In other words, do students at lower grade levels or lower English-language proficiency reach the benchmarks at a faster rate than students at a higher grade or higher level of language proficiency?
3. Should or does the native language of ELLs affect grade-level student performance standards?

More questions that could be concurrently examined are:

1. Are the current grade-level reading standards benchmarks in the California ELD standards realistic for ELLs to achieve?

2. What is the average length of time it takes for an ELL to be reclassified as FEP based on each proficiency and grade level?
3. What are the conditions necessary to foster this growth rate?

This research would be significant because it would examine the student performance standards in English reading compared to California's current grade-level reading content and student performance standards. The results of such a study would establish realistic grade-level student performance standards and goals in reading achievement for students, schools, and districts. Since California has developed and is currently using the state ELD standards, this proposed study would have implications for ELL populations in other states as well.

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Endnote

[1] If the order of acquisition of aspects of language differs for some aspects of L1 and L2 acquisition, benchmarks for L1 and L2 development should be different. It has been assumed that standards for L1 and L2 acquirers are the same, that both groups are capable of reaching a certain level of competence. For those beginning L2 acquisition later in childhood, however, there may be limits. Some current studies suggest that those who begin L2 acquisition later in childhood may attain extremely high levels of proficiency in the L2 and may appear to have native-like competence, but careful testing reveals subtle deficiencies. Johnson (1992), for example, studied native speakers of Chinese and Korean who had lived in the United States for an average of 11 years. Johnson reported that those who arrived in the United States between ages 3 and 7 did as well as native speakers on grammaticality judgment tests, but those arriving after age 8 did not. Their performance was below the native level, however, only on a few aspects of grammar: determiners, plurals, and a grammatical feature known as “subcategorization” (knowing whether some verbs require direct objects and others require prepositional phrases, e.g., judging a sentence such as “The man allows his son watch TV” to be ungrammatical but judging a sentence such as “The man lets his son watch TV” to be grammatical). If there is a biological limit to L2 acquisition in older children, some of the standards designed for native speakers are clearly unfair. Research in this area is sparse, but enough has been done to question the assumption that all of those who begin L2 acquisition in childhood can reach the native-speaker standard.

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